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Letter to Michael Kowalski

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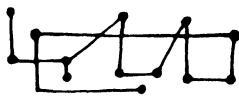
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# LETTER TO MICHAEL KOWALSKI



WILLIAM DEFOTIS

THROUGHOUT OUR YEARS of acquaintance, I've approached your writing with curiosity and interest. I was prompted to write a response to your article "The Exhaustion of Western Art Music" (*Perspectives of New Music*, vol. 21, nos. 1 & 2, 1982–83) after being not only immediately engaged by its theses but also caught up in various ways to read it against the grain. Appropriately enough, what follows is simultaneously full of enthusiasm and resistance.

I find myself totally sympathetic with your refusal to join music critics who try to find someone or something to blame for the state of affairs we find ourselves in as composers. But I did bridle when you mentioned the *New York Times* critic Donal Henahan in the same breath with Eduard Hanslick. Perhaps it was just my sense of fair play that made me think, poor Hanslick doesn't deserve this. But my annoyance lingered. I realized that it wasn't just because

Hanslick operated on a vastly higher level than Henahan, but because your facile comparison of their positions exemplified your larger view of nineteenth-century music and aesthetics—a view upon which you depend for your arguments, and which I think is in some ways incorrect. But then, I asked myself, is that so crucial to your discussion of musical prospects in the 1980s? I think it is, for these reasons: you invoke Hanslick as the nineteenth-century parallel to Henahan in that they are both defenders of “absolute music,” but you presume that “absolute music” has always meant “music for music’s sake” or music composed “only with reference to its own structure and its place in the history of Western music,” as you put it. You go so far as to presume that “absolute music,” *so defined*, has become virtually synonymous with “Western art music” since about 1800. I think these presumptions are false.

To even imply that Hanslick ever supported such a simple notion of absolute music is misleading. In Carl Dahlhaus’ recent book, *Die Idee der absoluten Musik* (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1978), there appears the following discussion and quotation of Hanslick (page 33, my translation):

The impression that with Hanslick the term “absolute music” completely lost its metaphysical aura—that it meant nothing other than the claim that “real” music has no text, function, or program—is, at least in part, a deception. The essay “On the Beautiful in Music” closes in the first edition (1854) with a dithyramb which betrays the piety of the “formalist” Hanslick in opposition to the romantic metaphysics of instrumental music: . . . “Even in the listener’s mind, this intellectual and spiritual content connects the sonic art’s beauty with all other great and beautiful ideas. The music affects him not merely and absolutely through its inherent beauty, but also as the sonorous likeness of great movements in the cosmos. Through deep and secret relationships of nature, the meaning of the tones rises out high above itself and allows us every time also to feel the Infinite in the work of human talent. Since the elements of music—sound, tone, rhythm, strength, weakness—are found throughout the universe, man finds again in music the whole universe.” Shortly thereafter, the critic Robert Zimmerman wrote, “It seems superfluous to us, that, as Hanslick contends, these pure relations of tone bring about the appearance of anything but themselves—of anything, for example, reaching the apprehension of the Absolute. The Absolute is not a relation of tone, and thus it seems to us, it is also not musical.” Under Zimmerman’s influence, Hanslick decided to leave out the closing paragraph [in later editions] . . .

I am quoting at length here not so much because you misrepresented Hanslick, but to show how your common-sense notion of “absolute music” doesn’t even begin to address the meanings it had and the disputes it raised over 100 years ago, when it was a burning issue. The idea that Brahms’s instrumental

music, for example, was composed only with reference to its own structure and its place in the history of Western art music overlooks the role of metaphysical thinking about human articulation and movement even in the most unprogrammatic music. (It's no wonder that today's prevailing performance practice of Brahms's music manages simultaneously to be so sentimental and so academic.) By defining nonprogrammatic Western art music of the past 175 years only in reference to its structure and to music history, you are engaging in a sort of revisionism: you claim to be discussing "absolute music" when what you're really talking about is formalism.

The important difference here is not just that formalism is a much narrower concept than absolute music, entailing far fewer philosophical and aesthetic dimensions and allowing a much smaller range of artistic intentions; it's that formalism tends to rule out the contemplation of music as a social activity by making musical form and musical intention one and the same, whereas absolute music, understood more broadly as a type of nonverbal public discourse, leads from itself and music history to the social consciousness of a culture. Yes, I agree that the culture which spawned absolute music—with its audience of "musical doers," of amateur players and singers—is dead. But by depending so heavily upon formalist notions to describe the era of absolute music, you are led to characterize the end of that era as one of exhausted possibilities rather than dashed hopes. There is certainly some truth to both characterizations, but if you rely only upon the first one, you are prone to characterize Ives, for example, as a composer who couldn't free himself from the exhausted possibilities of concert music, even to the point of being indifferent to his potential audience. Actually, Ives appears to have been far from indifferent; his preoccupations with redefining concert space, for instance, show a concern for his musicmaking as social activity. That his music was largely irrelevant to his audience indicates not a retreat on Ives's part but an unsuccessful protest against prevailing modes of perception.

I think your view of music history does not even allow for the possibility of such a protest. What I miss in your essay is any acknowledgement of an ongoing inner life in the art of composition which may in some meaningful way be at odds with the world. I try to ask myself: how do I as a composer remain true to the inner (i.e., physical, formal, historical) demands of the medium of music while engaged in socially useful musicmaking? This question seems irrelevant to you, since you seem to see it as an either-or proposition: either "absolute music" or socially useful music. **Do you really consider it irresponsible to write music that is in some way alien to the world?**

In an essay entitled "The Novel and Europe" (*New York Review of Books*, July 19, 1984), Milan Kundera—who includes the United States in his cultural definition of "Europe" as a spiritual identity deriving from ancient Greece—writes the following:

But I don't want to predict the future path of the novel, which I cannot know. I want only to arrive at this general conclusion: the disappearance of the novel, if it does happen, will not be due to exhaustion, but to its being in a world that is alien to it . . .

Does this mean that the novel will disappear in a world "that is alien to it"? That it will abandon Europe in "the forgetting of being"? That only the endless verbiage of scribblers writing *novels after the end of the history of the novel* will remain? I've no idea. All I think I know is that the novel cannot live in peace with the spirit of our times: if it is to carry on uncovering the undiscovered, to continue "progressing" as a novel, it can only do so against the "progress" of the world.

The avant-garde saw things differently, for it was possessed by an ambition to be in harmony with the future. Avant-garde artists did indeed create courageous, difficult, provocative works that were condemned by the public, but they did so in the conviction that the *Zeitgeist* was with them, and would very soon accept them.

Once upon a time I too thought that the future was the only competent judge of our actions. Later on I understood that running after the future is the worst conformism of all, a cowardly flattery of greater strength. For the future is always stronger than the present. It will judge us, to be sure—but without the slightest competence.

But if the idea of progress arouses my suspicion, what are the values to which I feel attached? God? Fatherland? People? The Individual?

My answer is as sincere as it is ridiculous: I am attached to nothing apart from the European novel, that unrecognized inheritance that comes to us from Cervantes.

I don't think you would accuse Kundera, who was so deeply engaged in the literary and cinematic life of Prague until his censure and emigration after 1968, of immaturity or mindless sentimentality in his defense of the novel as a form. The terms of his defense show rather what I would call an unformalistic concern for form which can only enrich the potentials for the social useability of one's art. I say unformalistic because Kundera is not so strongly attached to "the novel" as such, but to the "European novel," which for him has no chauvinistic meaning, but rather a social one: the precarious identity of "Europe" itself is one of his themes, and his hopes for the future of the novel are inseparable from his hopes for the survival of Europe.

You are much less modest than Kundera about being able to predict future possibilities. In your section subtitled "The Future Is Bright," you describe the emergence of a huge inventory of sonic materials forming new "common practices" from

film, television and radio broadcasts, video, live theatre and dance, for psycho- and physical-therapy, for meditation, for the advancement of political causes, for the selling of products, for the inducement of hypnotic and hallucinatory states, for the purposes of increasing productivity in the office, speeding up traffic flow in the cafeteria, and soothing your nerves in the elevator . . . [These materials] will usually be unrecognizable as that music about whose integrity and survival we've become so very defensive, [and] will continue to grow freely and unpredictably, like a weed in a vacant lot. Someday, when its common practices are very well established in the collective "ear" of a media-hip society, an astute observer of the cultural scene will notice, probably with a generation or two of hindsight, that sounds are once again being arranged into patterns without reference to anything but themselves, and that this activity is prized by both listeners and composers alike as one of the crowning glories and supreme delights of civilization. And then, I suspect, after a brilliant period of rapidly accelerating innovation and elaboration, this new sonic art-for-art's-sake will collapse of its own weight, as surely as did its predecessor.

I don't know what disturbs me more about your scenario—your misconstrual of "absolute music" as being "arranged into patterns without reference to anything but themselves," or your apparent indifference to the raw materials of music. Perhaps you washed over an immensely complex issue—the relation of formalism to the neutralization of sound materials, and the paradoxical fetishizing of those very sounds whose potency is being neutralized—because it didn't suit your polemical intentions. But I don't mean to impute to you polemical intentions that you might not have, especially since you make it so clear in your final paragraph that we're better off savoring contradictory impulses than choosing one over the other. But at the same time, I'm left with the nagging feeling that your primary exhortation—for all of us to put music "back to work," thereby reconstituting sonic art by consensus—glosses over the questions: What music? Which sonic art? I don't think these questions are silly, or that composers' new orientation toward finding that consensus would necessarily lead to answers; these questions reveal yet more contradictory impulses which you leave conspicuously unsavored. Of course, the answers to those questions must come in reference to some particular social activity, some particular context requiring music. So my complaint is by no means that you have neglected to tell us what kind of music to write; the thrust of everything you say points eloquently at our insensitivity and indifference to the possible social uses which might answer that question for us if we stop trying to single-handedly reinvent music. I am concerned here rather as a composer who wants to support your exhortation, who finds paradoxical reassurance in your unresolved exposition of our time's central musical crisis, and who is constantly aware of the fragility of my musical affections.

You point out: “It’s a shame to see many of the best musical minds in the land mesmerized by this phantom [of music-for-music’s-sake], while the mundane business of reconstituting art by consensus—by putting music back to work, so to speak—is carried on by lesser talents.” This is the only sentiment in your essay which rests upon the evaluation of composers’ work. Since this evaluation frames one of your main points, I wonder how you could have resisted savoring this paradox: our “best musical minds” and our “lesser talents” can only be so defined here in terms of what you call “music-for-music’s-sake.” I don’t think that by pointing this out I am weakening your argument in the least. What I’m doing is revealing your “unsavored” contradictory impulses: on the one hand, to show that the context for creating a masterpiece of “absolute music” no longer exists; and on the other hand, to rely upon tenets of composition inherited from that old context when evaluating the relative abilities of composers’ musical thinking on the basis of their futile attempts to produce “absolute” music. Perhaps there is simply no other available criterion at present. But I think it runs deeper: “composition,” that poor word so often falsely equated with the attempt to produce “absolute” masterpieces or trivialized to mean the fetishistic application of a craft, is a concept which in its deepest sense can be propagated without necessarily trying to hold onto the image we recklessly project upon the nineteenth century—that of the composer as culture hero. What we face is not a choice—between either respecting the independent integrity of music or respecting its potential to be optimally used—but an imperative: to figure out why and how it is that the two approaches are interdependent. The necessary task of putting music back to work will ultimately ring false if it brings us to forget that deepest sense of “compose”—to nourish and protect a sympathy for sounds by placing them in time in such a way that they embrace formal and acoustical poetic logics while resorting neither to acoustical inventories nor formalist justifications.

Claiming temporary authority over some tiny corner of the universe is obviously necessary in order to even begin to compose, and it is just as self-deceitful to deny doing this as it is to declare oneself “master of history” or “philosopher-king-of-the-arts” as one claims this temporary authority. Please don’t misunderstand; I’m not trying to cling desperately to whatever compositional autonomy I can salvage. What I want is for us not just to savor opposing views but to embody them as a dynamic in our music (here I think there’s a lot to be learned from Stefan Wolpe’s work). I also want to avoid the arrogant mistake of assuming there’s nothing to be learned—about how to put music back to work—from composers who faced different predicaments from ours (for instance, Hanns Eisler, especially with respect to film music). It would be a terrible shame if we moved from an uncritical acceptance of the idea of immortal art music to an uncritical acceptance of the currently available social uses for music. We could end up unwittingly allowing sonic art to be reconstituted not by consensus but by default.